Where do we find ourselves?

The Experience of pain in Emerson and Joyce

“Where do we find ourselves?” are Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Experience” first words. The query is the author’s starting point for a number of philosophical considerations; it’s also the point of departure for our making sense of pain, through the reading of both Emerson’s essay and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

Emerson’s question “where do we find ourselves?” finds echo, I believe, in the library episode, included in the chapter “Scylla and Charybdis”, of Joyce’s major work. In the fragment considered, the characters Mr. Best, John Eglinton, Buck Mulligan, and Stephen Dedalus debate upon Shakespeare, *Hamlet* in particular. These are Dedalus’ words:

We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love. But always meeting ourselves.1

The fact that one is a question and the other appears to be its reply would be particularly convenient for my discussion. The repetition of “ourselves” in both texts is striking. I believe, however, that Joyce’s commentary cannot be attuned with Emerson’s interrogation; that would make my task too easy, and fairly uninteresting. In fact, the difference between the verbs “find” and “meet” is reason more than enough to discard the possibility of a question / answer schemata. I

in what “meet” reminds us of reunion, get-together, and assembly (that is, the convivial gathering of the four mates discussing Shakespeare at the City Library), “find” encloses somewhat deeper meanings. It translates into stand (where do we stand ourselves?) but also into a state of inquiry, of trying to make sense, of searching for an answer after the posing of a question. “Find” is, therefore, the epistemological finding, the founding of a conviction. The polissemia of “find” also makes room for free associations with other words, graphically and phonetically similar, and for word play. Stanley Cavell’s take on this topic is particularly acute: he links “finding” to “founding”, “foundation”, “foundling”, and “founder”2. His motives are different from mine, though; he wishes to found a tradition for American philosophy, whereas I only wish for pain.

Here’s the true answer to Emerson’s quest, disclosed immediately after the initial perplexity:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series, of which we know not the extremes, and believe it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair: there are stairs below us, which seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, which go upward and out of sight.3

Emerson describes human existence as a series of platforms, of surfaces; it is a limitless staircase on which we move upwards and downwards, establishing relations of conformity with the self, with the other, with the external world. The use, throughout the essay, of verbs such as “glide”, “skate”, “walk”, “fall”, and “ascend” deliberately adds to the idea of movement taking place on the staircase. Such verbs

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also establish a direct rapport with the claim for action, for gesture, for growth, on the one hand, and with the rejection of excessive intellectualization, rationalization, and dialectics. Hence, we fulfill a trajectory, throughout our lives; we “walk”, Dedalus claims, but that’s not all he claims: we “walk through ourselves”, which means that in Joyce, as in Emerson, the walk is circular, begins and ends on us. This idea consubstantiates itself on another phrase by Dedalus. In the chapter “Circe”, the character inquires:

What went forth to the ends of the world to traverse not itself. God, the sun, Shakespeare, a commercial traveller, having itself traversed in reality itself, becomes that self.

The reader is also included in the process of finding “ourselves”. By means of the pronoun, he is bestowed with agency in the writing of the texts he is actually reading. I do not mean by this a reference to reader-response critical approaches or to the presence (undeniable as it is, in Joyce’s novel) of rhetorical mechanisms typical in texts of the Modernity, such as reflexivity. The reader of both these texts is part of the “ourselves” because, in the act of traversing himself, unity and indivisibility is found. In other words, both the author (Emerson or Joyce) and the reader become one, or rather, as proposed by the Portuguese philosopher, father and son:

I do not argue the merit of my poetic idea, its religious and philosophic reach. It is outside my territory. I leave it to the critics and the goats and other rodents. What matters to me is show it to my reader, conceived in me as daughter, flesh of my flesh. And what are we, to ourselves, if not a son? Son or father. Who can tell one from the other? Substance from substance? Light from light?

Elsewhere, Emerson shall declare:

I am very much struck in literature by the appearance, that one person wrote all the books; as if the editor of a journal planted his body of reporters in different parts of the field of action, and relieved some by others from time to time; but there is such equality and identity in both of judgment and point of view in the narrative, that it is plainly the work of one all-seeing, all-hearing gentleman.

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1 “But what help from these fineries or pedantries? What help from thought? Life is not dialectics. We, I think, in these times, have had lessons enough of the futility of criticism. Our young people have thought and written much on labor and reform, and for all that they have written, neither the world nor themselves have got on a step. Intellectual tasting of life will not supersede muscular activity”. Emerson, “Experience”, 252.
2 Cf. Heirich von Kleist, On the Puppet Theater (1811): “We see how, in the organic world, as reflection grows darker and weaker, grace emerges ever more radiant and supreme. – But just as two intersecting lines, converging on one side of a point, reappear on the other after their passage through infinity, and just as our image, as we approach a concave mirror, vanishes to infinity only to reappear before our very eyes, so will grace, having likewise traversed the infinite, return to us once more, and so appear most purely in that bodily form that has either no consciousness at all or an infinite one, which is to say, either in the puppet or a god.”
3 Joyce, op. cit., 623.
4 Teixeira de Pascoaes, Portuguese poet and philosopher, wrote (I translate): “I feel that I am and I remember what I was. I feel myself the same and another and another... a same that transforms itself, though remaining. And, this way, we are present in each distinct person in which we unfold”. Teixeira de Pascoaes, O Homem Universal. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim. 1993, 87.
6 Emerson, “Nominalist and realist”, op. cit., 355.
The consubstantiation of father and son is also to be found in *Ulysses*, although in a different way from Emerson. And how could it not be different, if Joyce was Irish, born into a catholic world, even though he would forever break the ties with the Catholic Church in early adulthood? The mystery of communion fascinated Joyce for the dramatic splendor of the ceremony, but the catholic belief that the wafer and the wine are for a fact the body and the blood of Christ was always questioned by Joyce and by his brother, Stanislaus. Discarded the catholic views, the theme of the Holy Trinity in *Ulysses* is expressed by means of drama: Shakespeare, in a nutshell. *Hamlet* becomes, in *Ulysses*, the paradigm of the meeting of the father, the son, and the holy ghost. Mind Dedalus:

He [Shakespeare] is a ghost, a shadow now, the wind by Elsinore’s rocks or what you will, the sea’s voice, a voice heard only in the heart of him who is the substance of his shadow, the son consubstantial with the father.

- Amen!”

Shakespeare is, therefore, in *Ulysses*, “all in all in all of us”, but where do we find ourselves if, as Hamlet, we must ask “How stand I then, / That have a father killed?”

After Rudy’s death, Bloom confines himself in a secluded world where the only contact with the exterior seems to be established by means of a disproportionate use of language:

And of course Bloom had to have his say too about if a fellow had a rower’s heart violent exercise was bad. I declare to my antimacassar if you took up a straw from the bloody floor and if you said to Bloom: Look at, Bloom. Do you see that straw? That’s a straw. Declare to my aunt he’d talk about it for an hour so he would and talk steady”.

The contact with the others is exclusively verbal, for touching another human being, namely Molly and his daughter, is not a possibility since Rudy died: “There remained a period of 10 years, 5 months and 18 days during which carnal intercourse had been incomplete, without ejaculation of semen within the natural female organ.”

For Emerson, on the other hand, the relationship between two beings was analogous to that of two spheres:

Two human beings are like globes, which can touch each other only in one point, and, whilst they remain in contact, all other points of each of the spheres are inert; their turn must also come, and the longer a particular union lasts, the more energy of appetency the parts not in union acquire.
Leopold Bloom makes, therefore, sense of pain by unconsciously building a private fortress made out of lingo and loss of tactility, inside of which he feels safe and prepared to cope with whatever suffering comes next, namely Molly’s adultery.

As for Emerson, the pain experienced after Waldo’s death is compared to the loss of a property: “In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate, - no more”.17 We must not relate Emerson’s declaration to any kind of aloofness towards his son. On the contrary, it took him two years to write a single word upon the subject of the child’s death. Unlike Bloom, Emerson chose silence in the process of mourning Waldo. When ready to verbalize the subject-matter, he included it in an essay about experience – about experiencing pain and loss.

Emerson makes sense of pain by realizing that it brings no gain to those who experience it. The remotest possibility of relief and solace is discarded from the get go, and room is made for transcendence. From this lesson, Emerson finds (and we find it along with him) that nothing, not even the most unbearable pain, can let us touch the essence of things, of others, of the world proper. To be sure that intangibility is a quality intrinsic to human nature, and that the evanescence of everyday life is impossible to hold, is, I believe, Emerson’s most acute pain. The following sentence testifies Emerson’s utmost pain: “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.”19

That the most unhandsome part of our condition is intangibility is also felt by Leopold Bloom (who touches no one, as previously shown). Here’s what he says about Rudy’s passing:

I was happier then. Or was that I? or am I now I? Twentyeight I was. She twentythree when we left Lombard street west something changed. Could never live it again after Rudy. Can’t bring back time. Like holding water in your hand. Would you go back to then? Would you?20

At some point, Bloom, distressed about the transience of life, and the evanescence of all things, visits a museum. His sole purpose is but one: to look for traces of obsolescence in the statues of Antiquity, only to find that “they have no”21. The representations of Ancient Greece deities are flawless and timeless, unlike humans, whose package includes birth scars, holes for all sorts of purposes, fluids, and residues of past events.

Emerson also shows interest in statues. In the essay “Circles”, he compares human society to figures of marble which one god, by means of fire, turns into men.

Statues are paradoxical objects. On the one hand, they are empirically touchable but, on the other hand, they represent something or someone that has long gone. Statues are, therefore, impossible to grasp as a whole. The same seems to happen in literature: as soon as one registers upon the paper the transience of life, those moments become crystallized. The coexistence of transitivity and perpetuity is impossible to achieve in art.

But this premise is not co-opted by Joyce. His drive was to attempt to capture the evanescence of a day in a life, by means of very minute descriptions of the most common acts of human existence. He aspired for an unmediated relationship between the literary and physical reality, and Ulysses was meant to synthesize the immateriality of art and the obsolescence of everydayness. Let us not forget that the novel depicts one single day in the life of Leopold Bloom, June 1626. 1904. Stanislaus characterized his brother’s literary style as “the style the man in the street would use if the stress of emotion urged him to

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17 Emerson, idem, 247.
20 Joyce, op. cit., 213. Other examples of the angst of transience include: “His smile faded as he walked, a heavy cloud hiding the sun slowly, shadowing Trinity’s surly front. Trams passed one another, ingoing, outgoing, clanging. Useless words. Things go on same; day after day […]. Dignam carted off. Mira Purefoy swollen belly on a bed groaning to have a child tugged out of her. One born every second somewhere. Other dying every second. Since I fed the birds five minutes. Three hundred kicked the bucket. Other three hundred born”. Idem, 208.
21 Joyce, op. cit., 225.
express himself in the words he best knew”. And, in fact, *Ulysses* is full of rhetorical devices which simulate simultaneity, succession, and repetition. Maybe we should call it a series, a colossal “series of which we know not the extremes, and believe that it has none”.

For Emerson and Joyce (in the figures of both Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom), finding oneself is, I would argue, a process in which pain and mourning is involved. The search implies scarring and carving, not in a metaphorical sense, but metonymically, for making sense of pain happens through utterance and writing proper. The production of the page-statue, as it were, aims not at bringing Waldo and Rudy back to life, alas, an impossible task, but at attempting a connection with things past, not through remembrance, but through the literal materialization of daily life. Joyce finds himself in the conversion of “the bread of everyday life into something that has a permanent artistic life of its own”; Emerson in “this new yet unapproachable America.” We find ourselves in the texts they have written.

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22 Stanislaus Joyce, *op. cit.*, 124.
23 I would gather the three mechanisms under the quote: “And at the same time perhaps a priest round the corner is elevating it. Dringdring! And two streets off another locking it into a pyx. Dringadring! And in a ladychapel another is taking houses all to his own cheek. Dringdring! Down, up, forward, back [...], Bringing his host down and kneeling he heard twine with his second bell the first bell the first bell of the transept (he is lifting his) and, rising, heard (now I am lifting) their two bells (he is kneeling) twang in diphthong”. Joyce, *op. cit.*, 49.
24 Stanislaus Joyce, *op. cit.*, 104.